

County leaders eye Mt. Lemmon tram

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Feasibility-study proposals sought

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After years of talk, Pima County officials are taking a serious look at the idea of building an aerial tramway to the top of Mount Lemmon.

County officials are seeking proposals from qualified firms on putting together a feasibility study that would show how - or if - a tram could be built to take people and cargo from the base of the Santa Catalinas to the mountaintop hamlet of Summerhaven and back.

Even if the study concludes the tramway could be built, work wouldn't begin for at least six years, said Curtis Lueck, a Tucson engineer who's working with the county on the proposal.

But, Lueck said, "now is the time to decide whether or not the tram is a good idea." County supervisors hope to select a firm in December, and the study should be done by late 2006.

The five-mile route to be examined in the study - on the west slope of the Santa Catalinas, from Catalina State Park near Oro Valley to Mount Lemmon - would be almost twice as long as the 2.7-mile Sandia Peak tram, near Albuquerque, which bills itself as "the world's longest aerial tramway."

Lueck, who wrote a 2003 report on the local tram concept, estimates the project would cost \$20 million to \$40 million.

Pima County Supervisor Ray Carroll, whose district includes much of the area in which the tram would be built, said the feasibility study would include an analysis of possible funding sources - public, private or a combination.

Environmentalists are wary of the proposal, but some said they'll reserve judgement.

"We need to keep our minds open and do the research and listen to the arguments for and against before we make our decision," said Linda Rothchild, an official with the local chapter of the Sierra Club. "But anything that impedes wildlife corridors or habitat is something we would look very closely at."

Carroll said the project would be designed to minimize environmental impact. The proposed route would follow a power line right of way north of the Pusch Ridge Wilderness Area and go up Cargodera Canyon.

David Hodges, policy director for the Sky Island Alliance - a group that seeks to protect biologically rich habitats in the mountains of the Southwestern deserts - was glad to hear that.

"The previous proposal went through the Pusch Ridge wilderness," he said. "Any proposal to take it through the wilderness we would oppose vigorously."

But Phil Mack, co-owner of Mount Lemmon General Store and Gift Shop in Summerhaven, believes that the tram would benefit the environment, because it would reduce the number of motorists who drive up the Mount Lemmon Highway.

"Personally, I think it would be good for the mountain," he said. "It would definitely bring a lot of people up, without the pollution, and without the parking problems."

Pam Rinella, owner of the Mount Lemmon Cafe, said the idea "certainly makes sense."

"There's a finite number of people who can fit up here if they drive cars," she said.

Lueck said the feasibility study, estimated to cost \$75,000 to \$100,000, would include consideration of a shuttle bus operation to take tourists from the tram's upper station to attractions around Summerhaven.

County officials had been working on setting up a shuttle bus service to transport people from Tucson to the top of the mountain via the Mount Lemmon Highway with \$1.5 million from the 1997 transportation bond. But that idea is on hold after it was met with opposition from Summerhaven residents concerned about the bus route.

The tram, a sort of large-scale ski lift with passengers riding in cars or gondolas suspended from cables, could be used in conjunction with or instead of a shuttle, county officials said.

The tram would provide year-round access to and from Mount Lemmon for residents and tourists but also emergency-service crews. Those crews might not be able to get up the mountain when the highway is closed due to inclement weather or repair, county officials said in a news release issued Friday by the county Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation Department, which is overseeing the study.

County Supervisor Ann Day, whose district includes Catalina State Park, said, "There are a lot of questions that have to be asked and answered" before officials consider proceeding with the tram. Public hearings would be held, followed by lengthy coordination with state, federal and American Indian agencies.

"But I think it's worthy of proceeding to the next step," she said.

County officials believe that once the tram is built, it will break even or possibly turn a profit, depending on costs and the fares, which Lueck estimates would cost \$15 to \$23.

Although shuttle service would be quicker and cheaper to start, studies show it would require a \$700,000 annual county subsidy, officials said.

The tram would move people more quickly - 15 to 25 minutes - compared with 90 to 120 minutes for a van on the highway.

Lueck said a Mount Lemmon tram has been proposed several times over the years and a primitive tram was used in the Catalinas in the 1930s to haul timber down the mountain.

But now is an ideal time to reconsider the concept, he said, because the county's population is growing and officials should act now to create a way to get up the mountain besides the Mount Lemmon Highway.

It's also a good time to plan because Summerhaven is rebuilding after being razed by the 2003 Aspen Fire - and it's changing, he said.

Mack, the store owner, agrees. "There are few people up here who say they don't want the change," he said. "But the little sleepy village that we had has burned down. We don't have that anymore."

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